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ABSTRACT

Two projects in the teacher education program at Seton Hall University gave assignments involving basic qualitative research methods as applied to a focused goal of interaction between future teachers and their students. The first project focused on life in community residential programs for adults with developmental disabilities, and the second on senior student teachers who interviewed adolescent girls with disabilities about self-esteem. Each project is described, including course requirements, what was learned through the assignment, student self-reflections on the study subjects they interviewed and the data gathering and interview processes they used, and how the instructors' teaching was affected during the semester. Both studies offered future special education teachers the opportunity to spend time with persons with disabilities in nontraditional teacher/student roles. The studies also afforded students the opportunity to see the realities of life with a disability beyond the classroom setting. In addition, both studies offered students the opportunity to expand their basic observational and interview skills that are useful in the area of alternative assessment. (ND)

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ED 406 335

Qualitative Research: A Tool to Help Future Special Educators see Beyond the Labels of their Future Students

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Everyone has experienced, at least once in their life, a moment when they knew the person speaking with them did not *see* them for who they are beyond the superficial markers. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) noted, it is only when we pass from the thin description of interactions and events to the deeper, contextually steeped thick description that we "enlarge the universe of human discourse" (p. 14). As teacher trainers of future educators, specifically those working with students with disabilities, helping our students recognize the difference between the 'thin' and 'thick' description of social exchange significantly influences the content and assignments in our courses.

Persons with disabilities are so often simplistically 'understood' by those who have had little direct contact with them by way of their label and assistive equipment. Many students entering our teacher preparation program have had little or no contact with persons with disabilities. Their reasons for choosing education, specifically special education, run the gamut from a sincere belief in the power of teaching to motivate and change people's lives to 'my parents said I would be able to get a job with this major.' Facing those realities when we enter a classroom, we assume the potential for an over reliance on thin description and worn cultural stereotypes about persons with disabilities may be the 'starting point' for many of our students.

Qualitative research, especially the methods of in-depth observation and interviewing, have broadened the discussion of life within labels by shifting data gathering and interpretation from the outsider's perspective to the insider's (emic perspective) (Bogdan and Taylor, 1982). As

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Langness and Frank (1981) note, the use of qualitative methods, such as life histories, provide the opportunity to see persons as wholes rather than as subcategories. Langness and Levine (1986) specifically advocate the use of these methods in expanding interpretations of persons with mental retardation to show they are persons "enormously complex in their personalities, behavior, and abilities, that failure in one set of [I.Q.] tests ...does not necessarily mean failure in other areas of their lives...." (p. xiv). Following this line of thought and being aware of the high degree of potential fundamental attribution errors (Ross, Amabile & Steinmetz, 1977) being applied by our students to their students, we began the conscious construction of assignments involving basic qualitative research methods as applied to a focused goal of interaction between future teachers and their students.

Project One: life in community residential programs for adults with developmental disabilities (Szepkouski). One of the courses teacher preparation programs in New Jersey are required to teach toward certification in "Teacher of the Handicapped" is about persons with mental retardation (New Jersey Law Code 6:28). Family experience, volunteer and paid work, and research with persons with mental retardation (Mest, 1988; Mest Szepkouski, 1994) alerted me to a potential pitfall in this type of course: students becoming proficient in diagnostic criteria and instructional methods, yet having no real concept of the individuals behind the label.

The marriage of need and opportunity met at this point to create a small research project within the context of this course. As a volunteer of the Program, Planning, and Review Committee of The Arc of Somerset, NJ, I was regularly involved with their self-reflective and assessment efforts on the quality of their services. The committee had a growing concern about the care and attention offered to less verbal consumers in their residential programs. I

volunteered to teach my students some basic qualitative research methods and to structure a series of observations for them in three randomly selected residential programs run by The Arc of Somerset.

Course Requirements. Students were required to read articles by Taylor and Bogdan (1975) and Edgerton and Gaston (1991) on qualitative methods and their specific application to persons with mental retardation. A critical review of the content piece "The Judged, Not the Judges" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1976) was included in their final comprehensive journal while the other content readings were the foundation for essays on their exams. The methods material was applied to practice observation assignments, such as observe a setting for fifteen minutes, paying particular attention to the 'beginning' and 'end' of events. By making students aware of how the beginning of something may seem obvious at first (thin description) and then with deeper observation the line may become a bit more hazy (thick description), I hoped to prevent quick interpretations of behavior. These essays were also part of the final comprehensive journal.

The specifics of the assignment related to the residential program observations were that students were placed into three groups of five with each student required to spend no less than six hours in their observation site. The six hours were not allowed to be done in a single day, nor could they do more than two hours at one time. The goal of this structure was that repeated visits would allow them time in between to write and think about what they had seen, check on their interpretations at the next visit, and to increase their rapport and relaxation with the consumers sharing their home with them. Working in groups was designed to increase the amount of data in a single setting. By having five students, each doing six hours of observation, in a single program, a minimum of thirty hours of data could be collected. A time sheet was used by all students and

was part of their final journal as well as their field notes from each visit. Self-reflective notes, separate from the field notes, were also written regarding each visit and their thoughts on the assignment process as a whole. Finally, a group report was written based on dedicated class time to review, compare, and develop an interpretation of their data. The students chose their own themes for this group effort, although common points across the groups did emerge, such as staff-consumer interactions and consumer-consumer interactions.

What was learned through this type of assignment? The answers to this question depend upon what you originally wanted to know. If you ask this as a member of the "PPR" committee of The Arc of Somerset, NJ, I can report on specific and general types of interactions and events observed in their three residential programs. If you ask this as a teacher educator, I can report on the events of my class and the student's writings about the process. The excitement of a project like this for me as a teacher/researcher is that I have the opportunity to see growth and new knowledge in both arenas of my work.

Student Self-Reflections on Meeting and Spending Time with Adults with Mental Retardation. The following excerpts from student journals represent the range of emotions and thoughts shared by the class.

- "I am so ashamed of myself. I fell into the same trap of stereotyping as so many other people do. I underestimated X's intellectual ability just because he was in a wheelchair. <u>If nothing else, X made me realize that just because he was in a wheelchair, did not mean he did not have a brain</u>. It made me realize I had to look past the wheelchair and into the inner person, as that is where the real person is anyway."

- "I was a little taken aback by the wheelchairs and Y's legs looked strange. Then <u>as they talked about Atlantic City and were laughing, joking, and teasing, I felt 'they're not so different</u> '"

- "I learned a great deal from my observations, most importantly, that <u>it just takes</u>

time to lose the 'fear' of persons with mental retardation. Proof of this is that my fear lessened with each visit."

- "Throughout my observations and visits at the group home I learned a very valuable lesson, one which I will remind myself of each time I hear of an adult or a child with a label. Although I have been told this by Dr. Szepkouski countless times in class, it never really sunk in until I met the clients at the -----group home. The lesson is this: a person with a 'label' is still a person-not a label. I know how simple this is, but I never really 'got it.' I can now see how I judged members of my class [field experience reference] because of their labels....For me, this lesson was well worth the six hours spent at the group home."

- "Not only did I learn all about group homes and people with mental retardation who are physically handicapped as well, I learned about myself. I realized that I, even though planning for a career in special education, need to get over some of my stereotypes and prejudices that I had about people with disabilities."

- "I feel uncomfortable when someone can't respond to me...I feel upset, and sometimes stupid, when I can't understand what they are trying to communicate to me. What do you do when you can't understand them? You can't shrug them off and ignore them, and you can't pretend to understand. What do you do? It must be so frustrating for the person when someone can't understand them."

These six comments from the group of fifteen raise common themes and 'lessons learned.' All of the students in this class had spent a minimum of 180 hours in two different teaching field placements prior to this course. The two placements, theoretically, should be divided between a general and special education setting. If a student does not decide to add special education as their second major until their junior year, then their prior field experiences are solely in general education sites. The majority of these students met children with disabilities in the year before this project, and yet it is clear from their writings that the adult status and label of mental retardation produced fears alienating them from their earlier first-hand experiences. In addition, one student noted that although she had heard in my classes (through readings and discussion)

'countless' times about people being more than their label, she did not really 'get it' until this assignment.

The student's writings suggest that although they had spent time with children with disabilities as well as taken an average of three courses on disability-related issues by this point, their ability to integrate their experiences into a deeper level of human connection and meaning did not seem to gel until a project like the present one. Why? Perhaps working as a 'preprofessional' in their field placements, teacher trainees become preoccupied with one aspect of their role, 'conveyor of knowledge,' resulting in distance and lack of connection on a ***human*** level. They may develop connections with individual students, struggle with injustices suffered by that student and his family against the educational system, and yet not generalize that experience to a larger level. Relatedly, class readings, even if they are first-hand accounts by individuals with disabilities and their families, may raise emotional responses from students, but on their own are not usually enough to produce immediate schematic changes.

Although frustrating to realize that many teacher trainees, even those exposed to optimal field experiences and intellectually supportive material in their course work, may not be able to fill in the scaffolding that we offer them, it also serves as a reminder to faculty to structure our assignments to reinforce and connect their recent and current knowledge bases. Having heard 'countless' hours about the value of persons beyond their label in previous classes, present courses can not neglect the theme because students had that enough to 'get it.'

What did this qualitative assignment do for the teacher trainees that their prior experiences had not? Afforded them the opportunity to come out from behind the shield of "teacher" and all that implies: power, techniques, responsibility, manager, advocate, and placed them back in the

role of learner. By spending unstructured time with persons with developmental disabilities in their home environments, they were not preoccupied with lesson planning, observations by supervisors or cooperating teachers, and behavior management. Our students become the students of those they interviewed; learning about the daily events and concerns of life from those within a label (and outside of classrooms).

Student Self-Reflections on the Process of Data Gathering and Interpretation. The structure of this class assignment allowed students to work individually by visiting their assigned group home on their own, but also required group work to compare and contrast their observations with others visiting the same residential program. The goal of the group work was to illustrate that observational data collection is not 'easy' and that what you see on one or two visits may not necessarily represent a long term issue. By having to place their observations side-by-side with others visiting the same people and location, students learned how complicated a simple exchange could look to three different observers.

- "I enjoyed working in a group. It is always interesting to find out how different people perceive things differently. Sometimes talking to someone else about what you observed can be helpful because they may see something that you did not see before. Piecing together all of the information helped to complete the whole picture. I learned a lot by working in a group. It was especially enjoyable because it is not something that is done often in other classroom situations. It was relaxing and made the class more interesting."

- "...I find myself reflecting on how much the group experience helped me to "see" the bigger picture. I don't think I would have been able to if I were completing this project on my own. Most of all, I feel working as a group has made me realize how essential it can be to confer with other colleagues to gather information on students when teaching. By attaining the insights of other professionals, as well as parents, I may be able to "see" a student in a way I may not have been able to on my own."

- "In general, I don't enjoy working in a group. One other person is okay, but more than that usually creates chaos. As a group it is difficult to come up with themes because I see one thing, someone else sees something different, and a third person sees something else. I see one theme from my experiences and someone else sees the same theme from their experiences. Enter conflict. This is why working in a large group becomes difficult."

The first two comments illustrate what I hoped the students would take away from the assignment; a sense of the complexity of observational data and the value of cross checking qualitative data. The second comment represents an even higher level of thinking by generalizing her knowledge from the present group work to the value of comprehensive data gathering in her future role as a teacher. The third comment is included to show that not everyone was happy with this work or interested enough to reflect with any seriousness upon their own experiences and words. This student did not see the irony in her writing, that not always agreeing on what they saw was part of the learning process. This group, as a whole, did not stop to ask, 'if we are seeing different things then why might that be happening?'

Thinking about the differences between the writers of the first two comments and the third as future educators, I suspect that the first two will seek and attempt to understand the opinions of others when problem solving while the third will hear other's thoughts as 'personal bias' with little value. Did participation in this qualitative research project measurably change the attitudes and actions of the first two students? I do not know the answer to that question. However, the student's writings themselves suggest that the opportunity to learn in a nontraditional manner and with others seemed to be a valued experience.

How was my teaching, during the semester-long project, effected? The arrangements for this type of class project were complicated and required several months of advanced planning. Specifically, conferring with the university human subjects committee regarding the need, or lack

of it, for official approvement, alerting staff at the group homes about the general purpose of the observations and who would be carrying them out, and gathering materials like directions to the group homes and new readings. I divided the two and a half hour class into two parts each week. The first was always dedicated to the course's 'traditional' topics, such as the development of a sense of self when confronted with stigma or cognitive development, while the second half was spent on the 'how to's' of observation, discussing specific readings related to qualitative work, and group processing about their findings. I definitely covered the 'traditional' topics in a faster, more abbreviated version than semesters when I did not do this project. However, the positive effects of their first-hand learning, for me, outweighed the negatives of rushing some information.

Project Two: senior student teachers interview adolescent girls with disabilities about self-esteem. This project developed as a result of our roles as mothers of daughters, our interest in the burgeoning literature on self esteem in young girls, and our work with persons with disabilities of all ages. Unlike the first project, neither one of us taught a course where we could neatly fit these interests, but a call for grant proposals from the university research council encouraged us to move forward, leaving the 'location' for a teacher/student qualitative project to emerge later. Receiving a small grant from the university, we were able to solicit potential interviewers for our project, by way of independent studies, from senior dual majors in special and elementary education needing a topic for their research seminar in elementary education.

Less than a week before the start of a new semester, we were offered a section of the research course which would include only students willing to participate in a pilot qualitative study looking at self esteem issues in adolescent girls with disabilities. Seventeen seniors, all

finished with their full-time teaching experience, joined the class. All were dual education majors and women. The majority of male education majors are in secondary education and were not eligible for this course.

Course Requirements. The student's requirements for this course were to conduct at least one interview with an adolescent girl with a disability at one of three schools that had agreed to participate, maintain a journal reflecting thoughts on assigned readings, topics for group discussion, and thoughts about the process of qualitative work (specifically interviewing), as well as transcribe their interviews. Required readings ranged from Sadker and Sadker's book *Failing at Fairness* (1994), Orenstein's *Schoolgirls* (1994), several articles on women with disabilities and qualitative research (Fine and Asch, 1988; Fontana and Frey, 1994; Mest, 1988; Taylor and Bogdan, 1975).

The interview questions were jointly created by the faculty and students in the course, with an emphasis on encouraging responsiveness without being intrusive. For example, the opening line, "can you tell me alittle about yourself; do you have any brothers or sisters?" seemed like an open, nondirective beginning. As a qualitative ***pilot*** study, our students learned that the ways in which these girls with disabilities spoke about themselves and the topics they chose to raise, would serve as the basis for future interviews with more structure and focus.

Three private schools for students with disabilities were contacted as potential sources of interviewees. Why private schools? The schools were familiar to us because they served as field placement and student teaching sites for Seton Hall, they provided services to students with a wide range and degree of disabilities, and they offered easier access than public schools for this first level of pilot work. Letters to administrators, parents, and the student participants were

approved by the University Human Subjects Review Board, as well as the interview questions and consent forms.

The sample finally obtained after initially requesting girls between the ages of 11 through 16, consisted of nineteen girls ranging from 12 to 20 years of age. Their disabilities ranged from cerebral palsy, emotional and behavioral problems, to a shifting population of milder learning disabilities to more involved multiple disabilities.

Our students made arrangements with the school administrators to schedule the interviews at the school. Multiple interviews often occurred on the same day as students car pooled to the schools. All interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the student and her parents. Ideally we had hoped and suggested to our students that the interviews take place in a private location where the student being interviewed felt comfortable talking freely. In reality, the majority of the interviews took place in offices being utilized by social workers, principals, and those needing xerox copies. Sometimes several interviews were going on in the same room and, in many instances ,either a teacher or social worker was present during the entire interview. Our students, as do we, have concerns about the effects of the presence of these adult, authority figures on the girl's responses.

What was learned through this assignment? As in the first study, multiple answers are available to this question. One set of findings has to do with the specifics of what the adolescent girls with disabilities said about themselves and their lives, another has to do with the self-reflections of our students on their own lives as 'girls' in schools and what that meant to their development, a third has to do with what future special education teachers learned about adolescent girls with disabilities, and relatedly, how or will that effect their teaching.

Student Self-Reflections on the Adolescent Girl with Disabilities they Interviewed.

The fieldnotes our students wrote about their interviews focused predominately on the logistics of arranging the interview, the content of what was said, and their general response to the process, with little attention to their personal responses to the girls themselves. The comments that follow represent the few from our interviewer sample of seventeen:

- "I left the interview feeling very sorry for her and I thought about her and her problems for a good portion of the day. What really bothered me was that I believe that Stephanie's environment had a lot to do with her being labeled emotionally disturbed. It seemed to me that she was simply a girl who got into trouble in the neighborhood, and had some problems to deal with at home. I do not know her history, of course, but I truly believe that her environment has a lot to do with her problems."

- "Since previous experiences with 'ED' adolescents were not positive, especially with adolescent girls, I had a lot of preconceived thoughts and ideas about the girl and the school. I had already assumed that no matter what cultural or ethnic background my young lady came from, she was going to be 'rough and tough.

  At the conclusion of the interview, C was very friendly. I thanked her for sharing her time and stories with me and she stood up and shook my hand. She then told me to continue to study to become a teacher. I found this to be very encouraging coming from a girl who once hated school so much she played sick every day. I left feeling much better about emotionally disturbed adolescent girls. C changed some of my negative views and made me realize that girls with disabilities are not that different from nondisabled girls.

  ...I spent the interview wondering about her disability and the cause of it. It made me wonder whether her disability was a result of social problems and a rough childhood, or whether it was actually a result of something internal."

- "My observation of this young girl was that she was tough, street smart, but underneath it all she was like any other child with hopes, dreams, and fears!"

- "Her responses reflect her preoccupation with her developing body and sex. She made reference to rock stars and their supposed infatuation with her because of the clothes she wears...It seems as though she desires attention, but does not know an appropriate way to gain it. I could not help feeling as though her answers were filled with a sense of frustration. She shared stories which had elements of fantasy. These stories, however, seemed based on what she wishes for in reality, the sincere attention of a friend."

Why were there so few comments about the impression these young girls with disabilities left upon our students, future special education teachers? Perhaps the very structure of the assignment, a one time interview, coupled with the realities of conducting the interview with noise, distractions, and others around, diminished the likelihood of connecting on any significant level. Two of the four students cited above raised the same issue regarding the application of the label "ED" to young girls who appeared to have stressful, demanding environmental factors in their lives. Their confusion regarding the weight of external and internal factors in the development of emotional and behavioral problems reflects the ambiguities of definition for these disorders (Nelson, Rutherford, Center, and Walker, 1991). Relatedly, the last comment notes the young girl's desire, and perhaps frustration, with her lack of deep connection to another; an experience often shared by children with emotional and behavioral disorders. The third comment, recognizing the connections between all persons irregardless of their labels, was also made in reference to a girl with the classification of emotional and behavioral disorders.

Out of the eighteen completed interviews, the only comments of significance from interviewers about their interviewees focus on girls with emotional and behavioral disorders. Perhaps our students, aware of the environmental obstacles set before the majority of these young girls with that label, related their interviewee's comments with their own personal struggles with external pressures. Excerpts from their class journals highlight some of those struggles.

- "I received very few compliments from my parents throughout my earlier childhood years....my mother had a tendency to point out all my faults. My parents were never really the praising type because they were also not brought up in that type of an environment."

- "...I would be the only person raising my hand to answer the questions in class. My teacher would let me answer one question in the class, then for every subsequent question she would say that anyone could answer except me. This instantly hurt me and I did not raise my hand in her class anymore."

- "...there were many other moments during my adolescent years when I was made to feel less than adequate about my appearance, my athletic ability, my social skills, etc. It seems that a great many of these insecurities were in fact formed by males who were my peers. For a young girl, even the slightest derogatory comment made can be razor sharp."

- "My parents divorced before I was three years old...the constant badmouthing of my father and the attempts at pushing me away from him...I do understand that she was hurting, yet I should not have been brought down with her and her problems."

Whatever produced the focus of our student's comments on the girls with emotional and behavioral problems, their struggle to make sense out of environmental pressures, "real" problems, and the interaction of them, illustrates the hoped for goal of helping students shift from the level of thin to thick description.

Student Reflections on the Interview Process. Our students shared two specific types of information about participating in this pilot study. The first is general feedback about enjoying the interview itself, although little significant content regarding *why* they enjoyed it exists in their comments.

- "...I want to write how much I learned from this research project. I have conducted interviews before, but not in this manner. I enjoyed learning about the interview process and what needs to be done after the interview."

- "I loved doing the interview...the children were all so friendly. They loved to talk. Their answers to our questions were interesting. They answered much more intelligently than I had expected based on the way the social worker spoke about them prior to the interview."

- "The interview went extremely well and was also enjoyable. It is interesting to speak about topics such as this with students such as A."

The second type of comment reflects our students frustration with the adults who interrupted the interviews, violated the privacy of their students, and implied that they were not to be believed.

- "One of the major problems with the interview was the distractions. Having two interviews go on at the same time was very distracting even to myself. There was too much noise and too many people to concentrate. I also feel that it was not relaxed as I had hoped it would be. Especially because it was not just me and her."

- "...The student and I sat at the small table, next to each other because the environment did not allow us to sit across from one another. I sat facing the student and she faced straight ahead. While the interview was in progress the social worker stayed in the room. I was confused as to why the social worker stayed with us, because she did not appear to be there for the student. The social worker worked at her desk, talked on the phone, banged her file cabinet drawers, and disrupted the interview in various other ways...."

- "...I am unsure of the affect that the social worker being present for the interview had on the student. I think that the student may have felt that she had to appear to be a 'good girl,' this may have been caused by the presence of a school authority figure. I also noticed that when the student and I left the social worker's office after the interview, the student appeared more comfortable, and maintained more eye contact than she had during the interview."

- "...I was also disappointed in the lack of faith and confidence in the girls at the school. The principal seemed to find a need to be in and out of the room, as though he wanted to check on what was being said. No wonder these girls suffer from a low self-esteem."

These comments reflect what we consider to be the double-speak of some special educators. These administrators welcomed us into their schools, supporting the idea of their students sharing their thoughts and opinions, but clearly fell into stereotypic, protective patterns of behavior. By hanging around the interview space and disrupting conversations, they conveyed a non-verbal message to their students, and our students, that an authority figure was watching

what was being said. That figure could have been communicating one of three messages: (1) concern about what would be shared about their staff and school; (2) protecting the interviewees from perceived potentially stressful topics, and (3) monitoring the interviewees' truthfulness in answering questions. The impact of their presence on our students was a lack of trust in the administrators' communicated messages of belief in the abilities of their students.

How was our teaching effected by this project? Because neither of us had taught the senior research project before, we did not have a standard syllabus or course outline that had to be modified to fit the current project. Although the freedom of creativity was a positive, the fact that we did not find out we were going to be responsible for our student researchers in a three credit course rather than independent study status until a week before the semester started, limited our advanced planning for the course. The logistics of the study, locating schools, introductory letters, etc., required detailed planning, and even with these issues being considered and developed prior to the start of the semester, our students learned about the roadblocks in research. For example, administrators of schools would give us permission to use their schools, with the permission of parents and potential interviewees, but would forget to pass out the letters and consent forms we sent unless we provided regular prompts to keep moving. Our students would arrive in class, ready to discuss when their interviews would be scheduled, and find yet another delay from the schools or having to wait for the monthly meeting of the University Human Subjects Board. As teachers we found this stopping and starting disruptive, and yet as researchers we were used to the long road of preparation before anything truly begins.

Summary

Preparing future teachers is a complex process requiring teacher educators to address the multiple dimensions of the teaching role. Within all arenas of teaching, special and general education, future teachers need to be proficient in the techniques and theory of presenting information, knowing how to communicate with peers, administrators, and parents about their students, and advocating for support and recognition for their students both those struggling and succeeding. We would add to this list, based on the research presented, that recognizing the 'whole' nature of students beyond their classroom role enhances a teacher's ability to do all the skills cited above. In other words, offering future teachers the opportunity to see their students beyond the level of thin description.

Both qualitative studies offered future special education teachers the opportunity to spend time with persons with disabilities in nontraditional teacher/student roles. By viewing life outside classrooms for adults with developmental disabilities, and hearing about the thoughts and ideas of adolescent girls with disabilities, our students were able to enlarge their "theory and practice" knowledge about persons with disabilities. As one student put it, "A person with a 'label' is still a person-not a label. I know how simple this is, but I never really 'got it."

These studies also afforded our students the opportunity to see the realities of life with a disability that go beyond the classroom setting. For example, the students who spent time in community residential programs reported frustration at the lack of attention and sincere communication between the staff and the non-verbal adults with developmental disabilities. They saw the ironic co-existence of services provided and dehumanization in the same environment. In the study with adolescent girls with disabilities, our students experienced a similar irony between

voiced support for the interviews and interference with the private nature of the exchange. Both studies illustrate to our students that life with a disability is more complex than what they had seen in the classroom.

Within the context of the first study, the fact that group work necessitated dealing with varied interpretations of similar events offered a glimpse into the future of their lives as teachers. Diverse opinions about a single student's behavior requires an openness to others' interpretations, in conjunction with their own. As more students with disabilities are included in the regular classroom, this ability to communicate and work through multiple perspectives becomes imperative. In addition, both studies offered our students the opportunity to expand their basic observational and interview skills useful in the area of alternative assessment, which will serve them well as future teachers.

The thread holding this qualitative work and student teacher development together is the common goal of moving students to deeper, richer, contextually "thick" levels of understanding. Not every student was open to the methods, project organization, and the learning that comes from process, but the majority were effected, as seen in their journals, in some way that suggested their movement on the continuum from thin to thick description.

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